

Big Pines Fuel Reduction Project Proposed Action

Santa Clara/Mojave River Ranger District
Angeles National Forest
February 13, 2004

The Santa Clara/Mojave River Ranger District of the Angeles National Forest is proposing the Big Pines Fuels Reduction Project. The 947-acre proposed project area is located in T3N, R8W Sections 2, 3, 11 and T4N, R8W Sections 28 – 35 along Big Pines Highway, from the Big Pines Information Station northwest to the Forest boundary at Mile High Ranch in Los Angeles County, California.

OBJECTIVES, PURPOSE AND NEED OF THE PROJECT

The Big Pines Fuel Reduction Project was designed with the following objectives:

- **To Protect People.** To propose activities that will decrease the risk to human life due to wildfire for the visitors and users of the administrative sites, organizational camps, recreational cabins, ski areas, and the historic district associated with Big Pines Highway, and the people that are charged with fire suppression responsibilities for these areas.
- **To Protect Property.** To propose activities that will decrease the risk due to wildfire to homes and property, Forest Service Administrative sites, organizational camps, recreational cabins, ski areas, the Jet Propulsion Lab administrative facility, and the National Nominated Historic District associated with Big Pines Highway.
- **To Protect Historic Values.** To propose activities that will decrease the risk due to wildfire on historic values associated with the Historic District located in and around the Big Pines Information Station.
- **To Decrease Fireline Intensity.** To propose activities that will decrease potential fireline intensity in order that reasonable suppression activities can be employed.

The purpose of the Big Pines Fuels Reduction Project is to provide community protection by reducing fire intensity around 12 special-use organizational camps, the proposed Big Pines Historic District, 2 ski resorts, a facility of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the McClellan Flat recreation cabins, and the Big Pines Information Station.

Existing conditions in the project area have a significant proportion of dead and dying pine trees and white fir. The forest stands and understory are dense, where ladder fuels are abundant and conducive to high intensity stand replacement fire. Dense chaparral, along Big Pines Highway, is also conducive to intense fire and poses a threat to life and property.

The overall desired forest condition is to maintain a vegetative structure where fire intensity is low, with average flame lengths of four feet or less, and where fire suppression is effective, rapid, and safe. Therefore, there is a need to reduce standing dead and live fuels, ladder fuels, and the continuity of understory and chaparral fuels in order to meet the project objectives and the desired future condition of the project area.

Treatments would focus on creating an open, park-like stand with widely spaced overstory trees (conifers and hardwoods), with scattered shrubs and small trees in the understory, and herbaceous plants on the ground. Surface and ladder fuels would be maintained at low enough levels to avoid crowning, torching, and other severe fire behavior. Chaparral would be removed in shrub fields and forest stands, thereby breaking up the vegetative continuity to reduce the risk of high intensity fire.

PROPOSED ACTION

In general, the Forest is proposing to remove vegetation in order to: reduce the potential of wildland surface fires from transitioning to the forest crown, limit the potential for torching groups of trees near structures, provide safe egress along Big Pines Highway during a wildfire, and to reduce fuel loading adjacent to and around private property facilities and administrative sites.

Specific project activities in forested stands would include:

1. Along Big Pines Highway and all access roads:
 - a. Create up to a 300ft fuel modification zone from the centerline of the road.
 - b. Remove all dead, dying, or hazard trees
 - c. Thin conifer stands to approximately 90 trees per acre (maximum removal size 14"dbh)
 - d. Thin hardwood stands to approximately 120 trees per acre (maximum removal size 12" dbh)
 - e. Reduce shrub component groundcover to 15%
 - f. Prune remaining trees up to 10ft high or up to 50% the tree height, whichever is lower.
 - g. Remove or treat all downed fuels
1. Around organized camps, facilities, and other improvements that currently contain fuel conditions that do not meet fuel objectives:
 - a. Remove all dead, dying, or hazard trees

- b. Thin conifer stands to approximately 90 trees per acre (maximum removal size 14"dbh)
 - c. Thin hardwood stands to approximately 120 trees per acre (maximum removal size 12" dbh)
 - d. Reduce shrub component groundcover to 15%
 - e. Prune remaining trees up to 10ft high or up to 50% the tree height, whichever is lower.
 - f. Remove all downed fuels from site
2. In areas adjacent to organized camps, facilities, and other improvements, modify fuel conditions based on topography commensurate with the size of the facility to protect by:
- a. Remove all dead, dying or hazard trees
 - b. Thin conifer stands to approximately 90 trees per acre (maximum removal size 14"dbh)
 - c. Thin hardwood stands to approximately 120 trees per acre (maximum removal size 12")
 - d. Reduce shrub component groundcover to 15%
 - e. Prune remaining trees up to 10ft high or up to 50% the tree height, whichever is lower.
 - f. Remove or treat all downed fuels

Removal Methodology and Silvicultural Prescriptions

4. In flat areas (less than 35% slope) – 443 acres
- a. Trees will be removed by ground based logging equipment such as tractor skidder.
 - b. Shrubs and logging slash will be masticated.
 - c. Off site removed material may be utilized, chipped, pile burned, or incinerated.
5. In areas greater than 35% slope – 334 acres
- a. Trees will be removed by aerial based logging systems such as a cable system or hand removed or left on site.
 - b. Shrubs and logging slash residue may be hand-piled and burned on site up to 75% of the treated area.
 - c. Off site removed material may be utilized, chipped, pile burned, or incinerated.
 - d. Occasional short steeper pitches up to 50%, equipment may be allowed.
6. In areas with special restrictions (around organizational camps, heritage sites, riparian areas, and wildlife areas) – 170 acres
- a. Trees will be removed by hand methods, log loader, or cable based systems.
 - b. All logging slash and shrub material will be removed and disposed of offsite.

- c. Off site removed material may be utilized, chipped, pile burned, or incinerated.
7. Preference for retention of trees is listed as: Douglas-fir, black oak, sugar pine, Jeffery pine, Coulter pine, incense cedar, single-leaf pinyon pine and white fir.
8. Borax (tetrasodium borate decahydrate) would be applied to all cut conifer stumps to prevent infection by annosus root disease.

Public Coordination Prescriptions

9. Layout, design, and implementation of prescriptions will be coordinated, as possible, with representatives of each permitted use area within the project area.

Air Quality Prescriptions

10. All California Air Quality regulations as administered by the Air Pollution Control District will be met prior to any burning of treated material as per California Code of Regulations -Title 17, Section 80101.

Visual Quality Prescriptions

11. Unit boundaries will tie, where possible, to natural landform and vegetation edges will blend with natural patterns found in the adjacent landscape. Where possible, trees will be left in a random pattern with occasional clumping of 3-4 trees so that the resulting stand appears open in some areas and denser in others. Achieve an un-even aged stand is desirable. Shrubs will vary in size randomly scattered across the landscape.
12. Tree stumps along the Big Pines Highway, Highway 2 and private homes will be no more than 6 inches high and angle cut away from the road in the immediate foreground 300' or sight distance (whichever is less). Slash will be randomly scattered across the forest floor in a pattern that mimics adjacent stand conditions. Slash that is masticated should not exceed 2 inches in depth.
13. Log landings within view of the Highway will be fully rehabilitated (ripped and scarified, seeded if needed) and all slash and debris will be removed from the landing upon completion of the project.
14. Burn piles located within the highway corridor should be located at existing pull-offs and parking areas to reduce weeds and burn patches that take more than 1 year to recover completely. Keep burn piles small to assure burn patch will recover within a year.
15. Where feasible, locate skid trails on the contour within view of the Big Pines Highway and Highway 2 to avoid perpendicular lines/corridors, which motorists or recreationists can easily see from the highway. This will reduce visual effect of straight line and reduce skid trail from being utilized as a recreation corridor for

motorized and non-motorized users.

16. The Forest Landscape Architect will be involved in design of units adjacent to the Big Pines Highway, Highway 2 and private homes to assure visual quality objectives are maintained.

Wildlife and Plant Prescriptions (including Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species)

17. A biologist will be present during project implementation to prevent impacts to the known occurrences of Coast (San Diego) Horned Lizard.
18. For Southern Rubber Boa, large down logs that are located near rock outcrops or are located at the edge of the project areas not adjacent to roads will be left where practical. No burn piles will be established on large down logs. No burn piles or wood chip piles will be located on rock outcrops.
19. Two snags per acre in conifer and oak ecosystems and five snags per acre in the riparian areas will be left where possible (favoring trees greater than 12" dbh and at least 20 feet high) and where they do not pose safety hazards to the public to provide habitat for snag dependant species.
20. Moderate potential for foraging of California Spotted Owl is possible. Perform presence surveys for California Spotted Owls in the project area. If nesting pairs are located in the project area, implement a standard limited operation period.
21. Where they do not present a public safety hazard, wildlife use trees such as acorn woodpecker acorn storage trees and trees with nest holes will be retained.
22. Any wildlife denning or nesting locations found during project implementation will stop in the area until a biologist visits the location and makes a determination about continued treatments.
23. The project area will be surveyed for sensitive and watchlist plants prior to project implementation where potential habitat has been identified within the project area.
24. Occurrences of sensitive and watchlist plants located during field surveys will be flagged and avoided during project implementation.
25. Any sensitive or watchlist plant occurrences located during project implementation will be flagged and avoided.
26. No burn piles will be located on any sensitive or watchlist plants.

Heritage Prescriptions

27. Prior to project implementation, heritage resource assessments and surveys will be conducted in accordance with the "Regional Programmatic Agreement" (hereafter referred to as the Regional PA). In general, all historic properties will be avoided by project actions. All historic properties, extant within the Area of Potential Effect, would be identified, recorded, and the perimeter of the boundaries marked with flagging and a suitable buffer applied. No ground disturbing activities would occur within these boundaries and buffers unless specified below.
28. When project activities do occur within the boundaries of Heritage Properties or unevaluated Heritage Sites the following conditions will be applied as Standard Mitigation Measures.
 - a. Felling and removal of hazard, windthrow, and salvage trees may occur within historic properties under the following conditions: Felled trees may be removed using only the following techniques: hand bucking and carrying, rubber tired loader, crane/self loader, and/or helicopter logging.
 - b. Equipment operators shall be briefed on the need to reduce ground disturbances (e.g., minimizing turns).
 - c. No skidding or tracked equipment shall be allowed within historic property boundaries.
 - d. All such activities mentioned above must be monitored by qualified heritage specialists at the time of tree removal.
29. If additional cultural resources were discovered during project implementation, work would stop in that area immediately until heritage resources could evaluate the site.

Watershed Prescriptions

30. Follow Forest Plan Best Management Practices
31. Within Stream Management Zones (SMZ), activities shall not result in more than a 30% reduction in the potential ground cover vegetation at any one time.
32. The Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan, as updated, will be used to guide reporting and action requirements for accidental spills of toxic hazardous materials on the forest.
33. Full suspension of logs is required in aerial zones if removing wood from site.
34. Layout Foresters will consult with a hydrologist/soil scientist during unit designation on the ground.

35. All stream courses, wetlands, etc will be buffered 100 feet with a 100 foot SMZ. Hand thinning in these zones with TKO (Tractor Keep Out) signs posted on boundaries of the SMZs.
36. No riparian dependent species will be thinned in units.
37. Encourage Coarse Woody Debris (CWD) development along stream channels by falling and leaving excess snags not needed for wildlife or fuels reduction needs (10-14 inch dbh recommended).

Noxious Weeds Prescriptions

38. A field reconnaissance of the project areas (prior to implementation) and a noxious weed assessment will be developed for the project. The noxious weed assessment will specify areas where disturbance from equipment, fire, and project-related weed vectors will not be permitted.
39. Implement the standard "C" clause used during timber projects to prevent noxious weeds. Any heavy equipment used during project implementation will be free from noxious weeds or invasive exotic weeds before entering the project area. If any equipment enters a weed occurrence in the project area it will be washed to remove weed propagules prior to leaving the project area.
40. All equipment staging areas and burn pile areas will be located away from located noxious weed occurrences.
41. All mulches and seed mixes used for erosion control and obliteration of burn piles will be from on site sources or certified weed free by the State of California Department of Agriculture.
42. Where possible, locate burn piles away from roads to prevent invasion by noxious weeds.

Maintenance

43. All of the above prescriptions may be used in order to maintain the project area in desired conditions for the life of this decision.

DECISION TO BE MADE

The decision to be made is whether to implement this project as proposed, as modified to address any unresolved conflicts, or not at all.

This proposed project would be consistent with the Angeles National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision.